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Ten (Usually Wrong) Ideas about ELLs

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An ESOL teacher responds to 10 common misconceptions about English language learners.

Over the years, I've heard many well-intentioned but misinformed comments and questions about English language learners and my teaching field. I haven't always responded with helpful information, mainly because I didn't feel it was the appropriate time or place for a lecture. This article allows me to finally say what I should have said then.

Here, in no particular order, are 10 common comments about English language learners and English as a second language (ESOL) instruction that deserve to be corrected.


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1. All ESOL teachers speak the native languages of their students.

"What languages do you speak?" is the first question most people ask when I tell them what I do. The assumption is that ESOL teachers must know how to speak their students' home languages. In many ESOL classrooms throughout the United States, however, that would be difficult, if not impossible. I've had as many as eight different languages represented in my classroom, a level of language diversity that's not at all unusual.

I've spent a total of four years living and working in Japan, so some might assume that my foreign language experience would only be useful when teaching Japanese speakers. But in fact, it's relevant with all my students. Because I've lived in another culture and been a second language learner myself, I can empathize with how my students feel as they encounter a new language and new culture.

Like me, many ESOL teachers have studied foreign languages and lived in other countries. Some ESOL teachers are also fully bilingual in one or more of their students' home languages. But even though we may not speak our students' native languages, we all have training in how to teach English to students who are learning English as another language.

2. English language learners will never learn English if they don't speak it in the home.

Research in second language acquisition says that when students are lucky enough to have strong native- language skills, they will actually be able to learn English *more* easily.¹ So the best way parents can help at home is to develop their children's native-language literacy.

It would be wonderful if all schools could help children develop literacy in both their native language and English, but because of lack of materials, lack of personnel, or the wide variety of languages spoken, many can't offer well-designed bilingual programs. Here's where parents, even if they don't speak English, can assist—for instance, by reading books in the home language with their child or by talking with their child in the home language about what he or she studied at school each day. I often tell my students' parents, "We'll take care of the English at school; you can help us by trying to develop your child's native language at home and encouraging good study habits in general."

3. ESOL students are usually good at math.

I wish this positive stereotype were true more often. Yes, many immigrant students come to us with solid academic backgrounds in their native language, and often these students have studied more advanced math than what they encounter in U.S. schools. The language demands of math, however, can make it difficult for even well-prepared English language learners.

Math today requires a high level of English proficiency, even beyond being able to read and understand traditional word problems. In Michigan, where I teach, the state math assessment asks students to describe in writing how they solved a math problem. Even an English language learner with a strong grounding in math will need some language support in a mainstream math class. A student who has had interrupted or limited schooling will need even more.

4. Oh, so they don't speak English. Then should I use my kindergarten curriculum?

The music teacher who said this understood it was important to simplify concepts for newcomer English language learners. However, a modified age-appropriate curriculum would be better than kindergarten materials. Unless English language learners are actually 5 or 6 years old, their developmental skills and needs will not be the same as those of a kindergartner.

I hesitate to describe an English language learner's reading ability in terms of a grade level because it's different from a native English speaker's. For example, although older English language learners may be able to read words in English at a 1st grade level, they may not be able to comprehend these words as well as a 1st grade native English speaker does. On the other hand, if they're taught using a modified age-appropriate curriculum, they may be able to understand more complex concepts and learn more difficult vocabulary than a younger student would. A kindergarten curriculum for older English language learners just isn't the best choice.

5. ELLs should be retained in grade if they can't do the work.

One teacher suggested that a 5th grade student who had been in the country for only a year should be retained because he "couldn't do the work." Of course this student couldn't do the work—he was still learning English! Research says that fully mastering a language and catching up to one's grade-level peers can take a student from five to seven years.²

Administrators should remind mainstream teachers that ELLs will need time to perform up to grade-level standards. It's unreasonable to expect ELLs to do this without any modifications or accommodations. And expecting regular classroom teachers to help students do this without support from an ESOL teacher or trained paraprofessional is just as unreasonable.

6. ELLs need to speak more English to one another at lunch.

This was a lunchroom monitor's advice to me. All students, however, have a basic right to speak the language of their choice during lunch, recess, and other free times. Students with some English proficiency, of course, need to be reminded they could inadvertently exclude others by speaking in their native language, and students should speak English in the classroom if they can. Administrators and mainstream teachers need to realize, however, that if newcomers want to communicate much at all during their free time, they'll have to use their native language. That should be OK.

7. Immigrant families just aren't involved.

This comment was made during a staff meeting to explain why a recent fund-raiser had been unsuccessful. We need to understand that parents from many cultures happily give the school authority to do what's best for their children. To them, home and school are separate entities, and the idea of a parent volunteering in a classroom or helping out with a fund-raiser, for example, seems odd.

In addition, even if immigrant parents do believe in being highly involved in their children's education, it's often not possible for them to do so. Lack of time, lack of transportation, lack of money, or lack of English skills often prevent parents of English language learners from volunteering. Administrators and teachers who aren't getting the family support they'd like might need to do a better job of communicating why such involvement is important, as well as look at ways they can help eliminate the barriers to such involvement.

8. Which team will you be rooting for in the Super Bowl?

The teacher who said this to a recent immigrant student was trying to make small talk. Unfortunately, he didn't realize how context-laden his choice of topic was. Typically, newcomers don't know much about "American football," as it's called in the rest of the world, and if they do, they probably haven't been in the country long enough to develop strong team preferences. In addition, it would take a rather advanced English language learner to clearly understand what "rooting" means, even in context.

This comment turned out to be a conversation stopper, rather than a conversation starter. The lesson from this incident is to not assume that English language learners have background knowledge of culture- or community-specific topics.

9. Ms. G., the new girl, she don't know anything!

It may appear to the concerned but horrified student who made this comment (and even to other, more informed observers) that English language learners don't know much, especially if they've had interrupted or limited schooling. In fact, however, every English language learner comes to us with many life experiences. Our job is to tap those experiences and link them to the new information we're teaching. Newcomers aren't nearly the blank slates they appear to be. They may not know English, but that doesn't indicate how much they know about everything else.

10. Your students are new immigrants, so you probably don't have any behavior problems.

I wish my colleague's comment were true! Immigrant students, though, have just as much right to misbehave as other students, and they do.

It's true many English language learners come from cultures where educators are accorded high respect, and these students are rarely personally disrespectful to their teachers. Nevertheless, new English language learners still need and expect consistent limits and clear rules, mainly because schools in their home countries often provided firm external control. Once expectations have been clearly defined—preferably in both English and the appropriate native language—administrators should neither give English language learners a pass on proper behavior nor hold them to a higher behavioral standard than they would other students.

Well-Informed Support

English language learners face the challenge of mastering the academic curriculum while learning a new language. They're up to this challenge—if the support we provide for them is based on an accurate understanding of the assets and needs they bring to school. The next time you encounter one of these 10 misconceptions, provide your colleagues with factual advice to help them better understand ELLs and how best to meet their needs.

Endnotes

¹ Thomas, W., & Collier, V. (1997). *School effectiveness for language minority students*. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.

² Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language*. New York: Pergamon Press.

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